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SUBJECT: MORE RHETORIC, FEWER THREATS, IN COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA TENSIONS

REF: BOGOTA 3421

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C/NF) Colombian-Venezuelan tensions appear to have improved slightly from the bellicose rhetoric of late November, but significant irritants remain and the situation is by no means stable. Military leaders in a key frontier area remain focused on Colombia's internal security situation, not on Venezuela, though they are keeping a wary eye on the border. Colombian media reports suggest Venezuelan actions are leading to an influx of Colombian refugees returning home, although the scope of the problem is not yet clear. Leaders on both sides of the border continued to trade verbal barbs, suggesting a rapprochement is not likely any time soon. End Summary.

ALL QUIET ON THE NORTHEASTERN FRONT

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¶2. (C/NF) Colombian army leaders responsible for a key section of the border remain focused on internal security despite Venezuelan provocations. During a November 23-25 visit to the Cucuta (Norte de Santander) headquarters of the 30th Brigade of the Colombian Army's 2nd Division, top officials told us they had not shifted their focus or resources away from fighting insurgents and narcotraffickers to address the Venezuelan threat. Outgoing 30th Brigade commander Colonel Robert Angulo noted the brigade had seen no perceptible increase in Venezuelan military presence or activity despite President Chavez's ordering 15,000 troops to the border, while 2nd Division intelligence chief Colonel Rodriguez literally laughed at the mention of reports that the GOC was sending additional troops to the borders to guard against Venezuelan provocations. Embosffs did not observe any urgent behavior during a daylong visit to a forward outpost at Tibu (about 6 miles from the border), where most briefings also focused on internal threats.

¶3. (C/NF) The military is not complacent about their neighbor's intentions, however. Angulo told us his units had increased

patrols and reconnaissance along the border to avoid surprises, and his classified introductory briefing showed the army is clearly examining both the balance of forces between the two countries' militaries as well the operating environment on both sides of the border in case of hostilities. 30th Brigade officials stressed they were not preparing offensive operations, and they downplayed the GBRV's November 19 destruction of two informal footbridges linking Colombia and Venezuela near Cucuta, noting that plenty of other informal crossing points still existed. Senior Colombian Army leadership continues to order increased intelligence collection and reconnaissance missions along the Colombia-Venezuela border. COLMIL modernization desires include the procurement of main battle tanks, additional field artillery assets and greatly enhanced air defense artillery capabilities. However, civilian leadership at the MOD remains open to more cost effective solutions.

¶4. (SBU) On November 30, Agricultural Counselor traveled to Cucuta and observed a city thriving in economic activity. According to conversations with local government officials, traders and several agro-industry representatives, cross-border trade continues uninterrupted with between 30,000 to 35,000 vehicles crossing the border daily. In addition, contraband trade continues virtually unabated, albeit at a slower rate. It is the formal commercial trade that has stopped, which has had a greater effect on exports of textiles, food products and other consumables coming from

Medellin, Cali and Bogota.

#### COLOMBIANS MAY BE RETURNING FROM VENEZUELA

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¶5. (U) Bilateral tensions continued to flare in the wake of media reports suggesting the GBRV may be pressuring Colombians in Venezuela to leave. Venezuela expelled nearly 600 Colombians (along with about 40 Brazilians) working in an illegal gold mine in Amazonas state on November 28, according to Colombian press. The miners told GOC officials and the press that the Venezuelan National Guard closed the mine and forcibly took them to the Colombian border, where they crossed into Puerto Inirida, in Guainia department. Defense Minister Gabriel Silva announced the GOC would file complaints with international agencies alleging the GBRV had violated the miners' human rights.

¶6. (SBU) A high level GOC delegation visited Puerto Inirida on December 4. They brought humanitarian assistance and planned to bring back anyone from the expelled group who wanted to return to Bogota (NOTE: As of December 4, about 120 planned to do so. End Note). The GOC relocated 60 persons to Villavicencio in Meta Department on December 3. A few in the group had previously been registered with the GOC as internally displaced, but it has not been determined if they had sought refugee status in Venezuela.

¶7. (SBU) Embassy officials were unable to confirm other media reports that as many as 7,000 Colombians had returned from Venezuela in the last two months, but GOC officials insist the number is significant. Juan Pablo Franco, director of IDP programs at Accion Social (Colombia's development agency), told the Embassy's regional refugee coordinator that he had been in Cucuta on November 25 and heard reports that Venezuelan authorities and illegal armed groups were making threats against Colombians living in Venezuela. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Red Cross (ICRC) separately reported they had not seen evidence of a mass exodus, but rather that Colombians had returned in small groups. Accion Social and the International Organization for Migration plan a joint mission to the area to further investigate. GOC officials remain concerned that the hostile environment and stigmatization of Colombians in Venezuela could trigger large returns. The refugee coordinator

stressed to both UNHCR and ICRC that the USG expected them to monitor the situation closely to ensure the GBRV was fulfilling its commitments under international law.

#### WAR OF WORDS CONTINUES AT LOWER VOLUME

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18. (SBU) Even as the immediate specter of war receded, leaders on both sides continued to trade barbs. President Uribe asserted in a December 1 radio interview that Venezuela's economic "freeze" on Colombian imports amounted to an illegal trade embargo, and he argued that Chavez was building a "Berlin Wall" against Colombia. Echoing complaints we have heard from other GOC officials (reftel), Uribe voiced frustration with Latin American leaders' indifference to Venezuelan actions, and he complained that other countries were taking advantage of the situation to replace Colombian products in the Venezuelan market.

19. (U) On December 2, MOD Silva dismissed claims by Venezuelan Vice President Ramon Carrizalez that Colombia planned a military incursion into Venezuela similar to the GOC's 2008 military strike

against Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) leader Raul Reyes in Ecuadorian territory. Silva countercharged that Venezuela was buying offensive weapons and blowing up civilian bridges, reiterating that the GOC is determined not to be provoked by the GBRV. Silva added the GOC had no offensive intentions and was determined to continue to put up with Chavez's "insults."

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